

# Where Is The Beauty in Buildings?

A recent essay by Radomir Tylecote argued that we have turned our backs on the architectural traditions of our Western heritage, and in the process lost our connection to our own history and the generations that built it.[1] Dr. Tylecote argues well, and makes a strong case for reintroducing beauty into architecture; but his opening salvo is not followed up by a strong definition of what *kind* of beauty we must reintroduce. Here, I aim to briefly identify the three core principles of architectural aesthetics that we must respect in order to return to our architectural traditions, and end with a short discussion on what those traditions look like. First though, I want to explain why beauty in architecture matters, as Dr. Tylecote all too quickly skimmed over.



## Why Beauty?

Architecture is the only truly public form of art. All other styles of art exist in a dedicated space. Paintings adorn walls within galleries that we may choose to enter, just as we may choose to take replicas home with us; music is not constant, it must be played in order to be appreciated and, out of respect for one another, we confine our enjoyment of our music to our spaces, be it in communion in a concert, or alone in our bedrooms; television and film are much the same, and theatre performances even more so.

But architecture exists all around us all the time. When we walk down the street, we are surrounded by architecture—in the fact, the very existence of a street is a creation of architecture. Consequently, when we are forced to interact with art in our every day life, it is only necessary that we

ask that art to be good; when we look at buildings, we want them to look back, to make us feel welcome, and not be faced with an impersonal, expressionless façade. Even the term façade is misleading, since a façade contains an expression within it.

The consequence of bad architecture, therefore, is to make us feel less at home, as if the buildings glare at us as we go about our business, making an urban space into a place where no one feels welcome. Even in these spaces, our eyes are not drawn up to marvel at the wonder around us, but instead forced down to stare at the pavement, or off into the distance.

So, what are the guiding principles of 'good' architecture? I'm certain we all have different conceptions of what a beautiful thing is, but we all yearn for beauty in our own ways. So the question is not to determine what beauty is in any substantial definition; rather, we must try to define architectural beauty in its form, in terms of what makes a building 'look good.' After all, the function of a building precedes any discussion of its appearance, so we are not concerned with form-as-function, but what I have determined elsewhere to be the "useless" element of the art of architecture.[2]

### **The Principles of Architectural Aesthetics**

The first principle is that of continuity with respect to surroundings. And, in this, there are two surroundings that matter: other buildings; and nature. First, with respect to the buildings surrounding it. When a building is constructed, its very shape is limited by the buildings around it, and so the influence of what has come before begins right from the outset. Following this, when the skeleton of the building has been constructed, the artistic element of the external brickwork, mouldings, gildings and so forth are then dictated by the direction of the building towards its neighbours. For example, if a house is built in a terraced street, it is

natural that the front of the building should look inviting, with a well-adorned doorway, perhaps bay-windows, steps or a step leading up from the street to the door, and so on. In addition to direction, the materials should bear a resemblance to those already used around it; a house built from glass surrounded by brickwork would no doubt draw attention to itself due to its own distinction.

And it is this attention that continuity seeks to mitigate. When we look at a building surrounded by fellows with similar appearances, we feel at peace, as though all the voices of that street are speaking in harmony, and none makes pretence to be superior to those around it. The eye wanders across the house before us, and then from house to house, down the street until it reaches that natural point of termination, whether it is because we have lost sight of the end of the street, or the corner-house is in view, but carries on beyond it, offering us a satisfying completion of the street. This leads on to continuity with respect to nature, and it only takes some minor modifications to the above comments to understand. I shall not pretend we do not bend nature to our own will on many occasions; the reservoir at Rutland in England is a clear example of this, but for the most part and for the vast majority of human history, we have done our best to live *with* the world around us, not against it. For example, when we make a forest our home, we clear away some of the trees and build in such a way that our construct does not loom above the canopy; rather, we defer in awe to the majesty of such natural wonder, and humble ourselves by reflecting that deference in the size and decoration of that building.



The second principle, of which I have touched on, is of smoothness. Just as continuity is essential in regards to the surrounding environment, so too is continuity important in the architecture itself. But, as I show below, continuity must be distinguished from uniformity; a bland appearance of a simple

uniform does not offer the smoothness and enjoyment I shall discuss.

When we look at a building that is beautiful, our eyes are invited to wander over it. As in the First principle, the very face of the building is an invitation to look at it, but once we begin to stare we are then offered continual, gradual changes that allow us to walk our gaze across it, pause, and carry on again, finding small changes here and there that make the enjoyment much fuller for their presence. In this sense, smoothness is a principle that dictates the rate of change between these variations; consider redbrick buildings, for instance. They typically begin in harmony with the street they find themselves on, sharing a roughly similar colour with the street itself, to give the appearance of continuity between themselves and the pavement, so the eye is drawn inexplicably up from the floor to the wall; at the end of this first layer, they blossom out like flowers, offering a gilded variance that indicates "here one thing ends, and another begins," that other being the main body of the building; that main body then contains in itself sills, skirtings, and modest windows that offer both privacy for the inhabitant and curiosity for the outsider.

At the terminus of this building, the walls yield to a minor deviation in the form of a clearly identifiable roof, which has often different brickwork to further soften our view, and a satisfying display of artistic flair, as they show clearly where the building ends, to allow our curiosity a satisfying degree of completion. And in all this, there is a flow; the building begins, and in a way that is both clear yet subtle, often marked with steps or crenulations; the first layer yields to the main body, adorned with beautiful yet unassuming and soft decorations; before finishing with a satisfying moment of completion, where the roof slopes away from us and the decorations wink with an artistic confidence.

Contrast all this with, say, the glass blocks of the City of

London, and we see where architectural tradition has been ignored to the loss of beauty; the building juts up from a street it offers no deference to, with a seemingly endless façade of repetitive, bland windows that offer no privacy to those inside, and an unsatisfying, almost embarrassing view to those outside—except maybe at the upper levels, where the beauty of all those buildings that came before cannot even be seen. Finally, the building does not ‘end,’ but rather ‘stops’—it has a terminus, but that point is hard and sharp, and offers no feeling of completeness, but feels painful to look at.



The third and final principle is humility. It is the necessary continuation of the above two principles, but it must be stated, for it is important. Where continuity asks that each building shares with those around it a certain appearance, and smoothness requests that building be pleasing to look at for longer than a moment, humility reminds the architect that what he is building will be here long after he is gone, and therefore he should make no pretence to the function of his building either dominating the appearance of it, or disrupting the harmony of the buildings around it.

Each building has a voice, and each city, town, or village is merely a collection of those voices. The more poetic among us might compare it to a choir; each voice has its own note, yet the harmony of the whole takes precedence; and so, when a new voice is added to the choir, it must remember this, and do its best to respect that harmony rather than disrupt it. This is the wider perspective of the continuity principle, and reminds an architect that he is *contributing* to the choir of the city.

Another consideration of humility is of size; monstrously tall skyscrapers make us crane our heads up, making it difficult to observe the entire building in one view, leading us irrevocably back to what I mention at the start: looking only

ever done, since there is no reward in the enterprise of looking up.

### **How to Reintroduce Beauty**

Finally then, what do these architectural principles mean for the return of beauty in England? The relativistic nature of beauty from culture to culture is significant, as art in all settings is an expression of the values of that culture, and the same consideration must be kept in architecture as well. But what about the English tradition? As I have shown above, the redbrick style is definitely one that should be respected here, as it offers that feeling of completion and flow that makes viewing such buildings a pleasure rather than a chore. But this is not the only one available to us: The terrace tradition of townhouses offers a similar aesthetic experience, beginning conterminously with the street, rising slowly out of it with crenelated brickwork, leading the eye up to the well-framed door, where the eye then wanders across the façade, enjoying minor details here and there that flow seamlessly from house to house, both vertically and horizontally, stretching off into the distance, ending comfortably with a definite terminus at the roof.

And from the modest, we can step slowly out to the grand: indeed, the declining use of columns is something to mourn. Roger Scruton has written endlessly on the necessity of architectural beauty, and his comments on columns offer a glance into the utility of an otherwise useless thing; they create, argues Dr. Scruton, a place of calm in a public forum, where the noise of the busy street can be warded against, without committing oneself to entering the building itself: and in creating the sphere of calm they do, they prepare us for entering the building proper, where we can leave the busyness of city life behind and commit to the real business ensconced in that place.

But our focus must be the common house, as it is these places

that people will make their homes. The Prime Minister spoke of feeling proud to live in a council house and, in an effort to keep this article relatively politically neutral, I believe she can only achieve this if we make council houses a work of beauty, not a labour of necessity. For when people find beauty in their homes, they want to look after them, protect them and improve them for the next generation.

## Conclusion

I have attempted to spell out the necessary principles for the reintroduction of beauty in English architecture. Such an endeavour is possible; movements are already forming around this rallying call, and I believe it is a goal achievable in our lifetimes. But I have talked about *beauty*: I have only momentarily mentioned the grand, which lends itself to a different subject, that of the *sublime*, for an introduction to which I recommend Edmund Burke's [\*Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful\*](#). This subject, which is the realm of palaces, cathedrals, government buildings, and so on, is not my concern. I believe beauty resides in the everyday, and I wish to see it be reintroduced there.

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